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Dealing With Some Obstacles to Innovation in the Workplace



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Issues in the Quality of Working Life
a series of occasional papers

Dealing With Some Obstacles to Innovation in the Workplace

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Preface

Within business, labour and government, there is a widespread and growing interest in new approaches to labour relations, personnel management and job and organization design. The Canadian industrial relations community has become increasingly aware of the benefits which have been realized within a variety of workplace experiments in Europe and North America over the past twenty years. Since the early 1970's, the Ontario Ministry of Labour, through its Research Branch, has been exploring the area of innovative work arrangements within the context of our current industrial relations scene.

Earlier publications of the Ministry of Labour in this area have been generally introductory in nature; that is, they have focussed primarily on introducing new concepts or providing basic descriptive information to a fairly broad industrial relations audience. The following paper is written for a more specialized audience. It is written for those people who are already familiar with new work forms and with the many possible benefits of innovation and who are now faced with the challenge of actually trying to implement change within the workplace.

The following paper is based on the belief that in order to achieve change, it is necessary to reduce the forces opposed to the change. Its purpose, therefore, is to contribute toward a better understanding of the obstacles which may impede the fullest realization of the potential of new work forms and to explore ways in which these obstacles may be overcome. It is hoped that the paper will be of use to those people engaged in the difficult task of translating new ideas about the nature of the workplace into actual practice.

Introduction

Change efforts will not be successful unless the fears, as well as the hopes, of all the parties are taken into account ...Eric Trist, 1978

Over the past ten years in Canada, enthusiastic discussions of the potential of new work forms have become commonplace within academic journals, management publications and even the popular media. A growing amount of evidence from Europe and North America has demonstrated that innovative work arrangements can have many positive outcomes, for the organization, the union and the workers.

Although not all attempts to innovate have produced the results hoped for, those which were more systematic and pervasive in nature generally have yielded significant improvements. Organizations overall have benefited from increases in productivity and product quality, reductions in absenteeism and turnover, increases in the skill level and commitment of the workforce, and improvements in labour-management communications. Above all, many organizations have become better able to adapt to and, therefore, remain viable within a changing external environment. In programs where a union has participated in the innovation, not only has the union contributed to the success and stability of the process, but its own strength has also been increased. Finally, the workers have benefited from higher levels of work satisfaction and self-respect and from greater opportunities for self development and career advancement.¹

A tremendous amount of time, energy and skill has been devoted to promoting innovative work arrangements. Numerous books, articles and public speeches have addressed themselves to the benefits of new work forms. There has even been a tendency for some people to view, or at least to promote certain new forms as a kind of panacea for many of our economic and social problems.

Yet after twenty years of successful experimentation, and despite wide-spread efforts to convince managers, unionists and workers of the advantages of new work forms, innovation within the workplace is still relatively rare. There has been little diffusion of innovative work arrangements, even where they have met many of the standard criteria of success and where there have been carefully planned programs to support the spread of change. It has also been common for "successful" programs themselves to disappear.²

What seems to be needed now is an exploration of why new work forms have not been more widely accepted. Since innovation in the workplace is a form of social change, a quick look at research findings in the general area of social change should be helpful at this point. From as far back as Lewin, it has been found that it is easier to achieve change by reducing the forces opposed to the change, than by increasing those in support of it.³ It has also been shown that the degree of opposition to a new work form is in part a function of how congruent the new form is with existing norms, structures, values and ways of thinking.⁴

The purpose of the present paper is to address these issues, first by identifying and describing the different kinds of obstacles to innovation in the workplace (*as they currently exist* in our society) and then by exploring how these obstacles may be overcome. In order to achieve this purpose it is necessary to examine the differences between new work forms and existing arrangements. In particular, it is important to understand ways in which new work forms might be incongruent with those traditional

management systems which are based primarily on the principles of scientific management and with adversarial modes of decision-making which commonly characterize collective bargaining.

The obstacles to be considered in this paper will be discussed in terms of three basic categories: need, motive, and power and control.

These terms were used here according to their common, everyday (i.e., non-psychological) usage. Need refers to what people require, whether for innate or learned reasons, in order to survive and to be satisfied or fulfilled. Motive refers to the basic reasons underlying particular attitudes and behaviours. Power and control refer to the actual and potential ability to affect the outcome of events.

1. Obstacles related to questions of need. The challenge here is whether owners, managers, trade unions and/or workers need the kinds of change reflected in new work forms. It can be argued that our current work arrangements satisfy all our important needs and that organizational change is not necessary.

2. Obstacles related to questions of motive. Even if change is needed, who really stands to gain from the kinds of programs being proposed and what do they stand to gain? Do the proposed new work forms offer the kind of change desired by the various parties involved?

3. Obstacles related to questions of power and control. In what ways will the innovations change absolute and relative power relations within an organization, and how will owners, managers, unions and workers react to these changes?

It should be stressed that the treatment of these obstacles as separate categories is obviously somewhat artificial since need, motive and power are not exclusive categories, but are in many ways interrelated. They will be handled separately, however, to facilitate discussion.

At this point, it is important to clarify what kinds of innovations are being considered in this paper. The work arrangements of concern here share two characteristics. First, they involve some degree of *participation* by the workers in an aspect of the organization which is traditionally open only to management; for example, the scheduling of work, decision-making regarding such things as job design or organizational planning, ownership, etc. And second, they all have the creation of a more *humanly satisfying* work environment stated as a central goal, usually with greater organizational effectiveness as an equal, or secondary goal.

The above description obviously covers a wide range of innovation, from such things as flexible hours, job enrichment, or consultative management which leave many important parts of the organization unchanged, to autonomous work groups or even full worker ownership and control. Given this fact, it is understandable that many of the objections to new work forms discussed here will not be equally relevant to all innovations. The objections will be examined in fairly general terms, however, for reasons to be discussed below.

Points to consider before reading further

Before proceeding into the body of the paper, the reader should be aware of four important points:

1. First, *no position is being taken on the legitimacy of the obstacles* to be examined in the following discussion. Most people reading the paper will be aware of a variety of counter-arguments to many of the oppositions presented. The obstacles are being discussed not because they are right or wrong, but because the arguments have been made often enough to warrant consideration. It is important not to dismiss opposition because it appears to be irrational, or to be based on misconceptions or inadequate information. People's perceptions can be as important as, or even more important than, any "objective" reality which may exist. If people believe there is a problem with a particular work form, then their opposition to it is real. The reality of that opposition must be accepted before it is possible to deal effectively with the problem.

2. The second point relates to the question of who is presenting which obstacles to workplace innovation. The following discussion refers in fairly general terms to the views of management and labour. Neither group, however, is monolithic in its response to new work forms. Individuals within both groups react differently to different kinds of innovation. Some oppositions to innovation are widely held, some are held only by a small group. Of equal importance, the nature and degree of any opposition may change over time.

It must be stressed, therefore, that the present paper is not attempting to give "the management view" or "the union view" on innovation in the workplace. Its purpose is to identify a range of obstacles, each of which appears to have support from enough managers, unionists and/or workers that it may eventually impede a more widespread acceptance of organizational change.

3. The third point relates to the fact that a number of quite different kinds of innovation will be discussed in fairly general terms. On this issue, the reader is reminded that there is a tendency for many people to view workplace innovation as a single phenomenon.⁵ People are often not aware of important differences between various kinds of organizational change; they see all new work forms as painted with the same brush. They, therefore, assume that criticisms which may be quite appropriate to one particular new form are equally appropriate to all new forms. For example, it is not uncommon for people to cite the failure of some particular arrangement as evidence against the whole field of workplace innovation.

The above fact should demonstrate how important it is for anyone concerned with the promotion of a particular kind of innovation to be aware of the full range of obstacles to organizational change in its many forms. Only in this way will they be able to design a program which is able to deal with the variety of problems which may arise. This awareness will also enable people to talk and to behave in ways which make it clear to a target group that there are significant differences between the form of innovation they are proposing and other forms which the target group may find unacceptable.

4. The final point deals with the list of suggestions which will be made with respect to overcoming obstacles to innovation. The list is not meant to be exhaustive. It represents only a beginning, which it is hoped will be both criticized and built upon by others. Many readers will consider some of the proposed solutions too radical, others will find them far too mild. It is not the purpose of this paper to find answers to suit all needs. The paper will have

achieved its goal if it is able to stimulate further exploration of both the problems and the solutions that it has chosen to examine.

Obstacles related to questions of need

There are both union and management people who question whether the workers or the organizations really want or need the kinds of changes offered by new work forms. Many unionists and management spokesmen argue that the proponents of change express views which represent only the particular class-linked values of academics and perhaps middle-class managers, but which are not representative of the needs of the majority of workers.⁶ They believe that the real needs of the workers are those which have been, and continue to be met by unions via collective bargaining – which grew out of the demands and actions of workers themselves, not out of the theories of academics.⁷ They, therefore, conclude that the present system of collective bargaining is the best means by which to pursue the interests of workers and that new forms are neither necessary nor desirable.

In order to explore this argument more fully, it is necessary to focus on the particular aspect of workplace innovation to which the above criticism is a response. Many proponents of innovation use such theories of human behaviour as those of Maslow (1954), McClelland (1953) and Herzberg (1966), to argue that people are no longer motivated by needs such as pay or security, but by "higher-order" needs such as achievement or self-actualization. This belief leads to such statements as,

...today's workers are probably more concerned about the importance and meaning of their jobs... because the quality of work has improved so much that most workers don't have to worry about job security, hours, or wages.⁸

Thus, many people who argue for new work forms stress the primary importance of intrinsic job characteristics such as responsibility, challenge, autonomy and participation. In addition, they often conclude, since most jobs (in particular blue collar jobs) do not have these characteristics, that most jobs are unsatisfying, alienating, and even dehumanizing (for example, see *Work in America*, 1973).

This line of argument has greatly angered many unionists and workers, for several reasons. First, unions will object to any suggestion that economic needs are now being adequately met. They will resist anything that tries to downplay the primacy of economic needs and to move economic questions off centre stage. Unionists spend most of their time and energies fighting for better pay, benefits and job security and they strongly believe that these are still the most important needs of workers.⁹ As one union leader very succinctly put it, "If you want to enrich the job, enrich the paycheck".¹⁰

Perhaps even more important than the fact that much of what is behind workplace innovation appears to downplay the workers' central needs (possibly even to be a diversionary, pro-management tactic), is the fact that it also seems to imply that unions have been misguided in their efforts.¹¹ By claiming that unions are not pursuing the workers' most important needs and by saying that the jobs of most workers are very unsatisfactory, many proponents of change appear to be ignoring the important accomplishments which unions have made and continue to make to the improvement of work. To quote a leading industrial relations theorist,

Unions naturally react to such charges with anger... Given (their) impressive record of protecting workers' interests, unionists feel considerable annoyance with the self-congratulatory tone of some social scientists and management spokesmen who have suddenly discovered... that quality of worklife problems do exist – and who

then propose to solve them on management's terms and without recognition of the union's role.¹²

There is another reason why unions are angered by the claim that most work is unsatisfying, alienating and dehumanizing. Unionists argue that workers don't feel that they are in "dead-end" situations, or have been deprived of human qualities because of their jobs. Many studies have shown that one very important component of job satisfaction is the sense of accomplishing something useful, the possibility for taking pride in and receiving recognition for one's work.¹³ People want to feel that society values and respects the work they are doing. As Leonard Woodcock put it, "Anyone who does work—even if it is dull and monotonous—is doing useful work. There is a matter of pride in this".¹⁴ Claims by many writers associated with the promotion of new work forms that the nature of their jobs has made large numbers of workers alienated, apathetic, even authoritarian are not only seen as insulting to workers, but also are unsubstantiated by much of the available research evidence.¹⁵

In addition to the above objections, which come primarily from unionists, some union and management people argue that many people simply do not want "enriched" jobs. They claim that whereas the job characteristics held to be lacking in current jobs (e.g., participation, autonomy) may appeal to academics or even managers, they are quite unappealing to many workers.¹⁶ As William Winpisinger, President of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, has put it,

The point is not what intellectuals seek from work, it is what unskilled and semiskilled factory workers seek. And as one who has been there, I can assure you that the vast majority of the people working in the nation's mines, mills and factories are not there in search of self-fulfillment... One man's idea of boredom is another man's bread and butter.¹⁷

There are also managers who are skeptical about whether their organizations have anything to gain from new work forms. They worry that new forms may not yield economic gains sufficient to warrant what they will cost in terms of time and money.¹⁸ They question the ability and willingness of workers to make valuable contributions to "management level" decisions.¹⁹ Some managers also fear that such programs may only raise workers' expectations and thus increase worker dissatisfaction.²⁰

Management skepticism about change in the workplace was obvious in a recent survey of American chief executive officers and industrial relations managers.²¹ Many of these managers rated "more democracy in the organization" (64%), "greater participation by workers in decision-making" (49%), "job redesign and enlargement" (44%), "greater union co-operation" (42%), and "improving the quality of working life" (27%) as unimportant to an organization's productivity. And at a 1978 conference sponsored by the Work in America Institute, many senior managers expressed the view not only that the human factor was insignificant (relative to such things as capital investment and research and development) with respect to productivity; but also that there really was no problem with productivity within manufacturing in the U.S.

A final but important obstacle to workplace innovation relating to questions of need is the view held by many union and management people that their goals are different, or even conflicting.²² These people often reject new work forms because of the emphasis which the new forms put on union-management co-operation toward the achievement of mutual goals.

Some ways to deal with obstacles related to need

The debate over what are the “true” needs of workers is a long and tedious one, which it is hoped can be avoided. Although research has yielded results in support of almost every position, there have been some fairly consistent findings which are important: most of the evidence indicates fairly high levels of job satisfaction for all types of workers²³; pay and job security are still very important for most workers²⁴; several non-monetary characteristics emphasized by new work forms (e.g., interesting work and opportunities to develop special abilities) are also important to most workers²⁵; and there are considerable individual differences with respect to the work-related needs of people.²⁶ These findings, given the concerns of unionists and managers outlined above, suggest several strategies which might help to overcome the obstacles related to questions of need.

First, people promoting innovative work arrangements should be careful not to downplay the economic and security needs of workers. They might, for example, begin their discussions by explicitly recognizing the legitimacy of these needs and the necessity of their continued pursuit. New work forms could then be offered as something which, *in addition to yielding improvements in more traditional needs*, can make work even more satisfying.²⁷ Where possible, special efforts might be made to show that new work forms can themselves advance such things as pay, security, hours, safety, etc. The argument for innovation could be made without detracting from the importance of the traditional concerns and contributions of the union movement.

Second, arguments for change might be received better if they were not based too heavily on lamentations – about either work dissatisfaction and alienation or poor productivity. Such lamentations (even if accurate) might insult some workers, unionists and managers. It is probably quite important that problems be identified without being exaggerated. Change can be motivated not only by unhappiness with the present, but also by hopes for an even better future. Proponents of change might well focus as much on the undeveloped potential of workers and organizations as on their problems.

It is equally important, however, that extravagant claims not be made for new work forms. The results could easily be unrealistic expectations followed by disappointment and possible rejection of the whole concept. People should be aware that organizational change may require a period of adjustment where productivity falls and expressions of discontent increase. In order to realize more long term gains, it is necessary to ride this period through.²⁸

Third, innovations should not be imposed on the workers by managers, consultants or union executives. The affected workers should participate fully (either directly or via their representatives) in the change program from its start.²⁹ Workers should be allowed to define their own needs and to work with management to design a program which they feel will meet these needs. New arrangements should be voluntary, or at least flexible enough to accommodate individual differences.³⁰ If third parties are used, they should be acceptable to the workers, they should not be allowed to dominate the process, and they should work themselves out of the program as soon as possible.³¹ In addition, in order that workers really be able to participate, they must have guaranteed protection from reprisals for voicing criticism.³²

Similarly, new work forms should not be forced on management. In order to have some significant and lasting effect on the nature of our organizations, proponents of change must be able to demonstrate clearly that all parties – managers, unions, and individual workers – have something to gain from new work forms.³³

With respect to the problem of conflicting needs, the use of third-parties has been found to be particularly helpful. They have been able to work with labour and management people to help them to differentiate between areas that may continue to require adversarial processes and areas of possible mutual interest where collaborative processes may be more appropriate.³⁴ It is essential, however, that areas of conflict not be ignored or downplayed; they must be identified and dealt with openly.³⁵

Obstacles related to questions of motive

Most organizational change to date has been initiated by management, and unions are often suspicious of management's motives for promoting and implementing such change. Many unionists see it, at worst, as a new management technique for breaking unions and undermining the union movement or, at best, as a disguised form of speed-up intended to get more work without paying for it.³⁶

There is evidence to indicate that unionists' concerns may in some cases be well-grounded. New work forms based on greater employee participation and aimed, at least partially, at increasing worker satisfaction are used by some managers and consultants as part of an overall "union-free" strategy.³⁷ The basic idea behind this strategy is that a union is not always necessary because the workers' needs can be met through "good, progressive" personnel practices and well-designed jobs (for numerous examples see such management journals as *Personnel*). There are managers who introduce new work arrangements at least partly in an attempt to convince the workers of this idea, and to make them identify more with management's goals for the organization by downplaying the existence of any differences between the interests of management and labour. Many unionists are afraid that most forms of participation may have the effect which Strauss and Rosenstein (1970) found in a number of formal, indirect participation schemes in Europe where,

To some extent participation has strengthened management. It has tended to co-opt at least part of the union and workforce leadership ... it has helped contain and channel dissatisfaction ... it has the effect of making management seem less starkly autocratic and of obtaining more willing compliance with management's directives. As such it is essentially manipulative.³⁸

The union movement's response to this approach is to insist that a union is always necessary. They argue that the most essential characteristic for a good quality of working life is a strong union. Only the workers themselves, in solidarity with each other, can look after their own interests; management can never do this for them. Management is not accountable to the workers, it is accountable to the owners of the organization and the interests of the owners are sometimes in conflict with the interests of the workers. This argument has been made strongly by Canadian members of the United Steelworkers.

For honest programs to exist to improve the quality of working life, they must have full participation by employees. It would be hard to imagine such participation succeeding without a union to protect the employees.³⁹

And,

People who are seriously interested in job satisfaction will have to first tell me that they are in favour of strong unions, that they want all obstacles to union organization removed from the laws and that they want governments to make sure that employers keep their hands off the right of workers to organize.⁴⁰

Even beyond their suspicion that management may be trying to undermine the union movement, many unionists and workers doubt the sincerity of management's concern for the well-being of the workers. They feel that management will support programs only to the extent that they solve management problems and that real problems of the workers will never be dealt with seriously.⁴¹ Similarly, unions and workers are suspicious of behavioural science

consultants and academics who support management programs. Some workers see such consultants merely as substitutes for time-and-motion experts. The only difference, they say, is that this new form of consultant has a lot of fancy intellectual rationalizations to legitimate management's exploitation of the workers.⁴²

The most common concrete manifestation of this suspicion is the feeling of many unionists and workers that management is merely trying to get more work without paying for it. As one union leader put it, "Behind all the sophisticated jargon ... isn't the objective really just to reduce costs and maximize profits at the expense of the human factor of production".⁴³ Unions and workers fear that some new work arrangements are really disguised speed-ups—attempts to get the employees to work harder for no increase in pay and, possibly, to reduce the number of workers needed in any given operation.⁴⁴ It is likely that such fears would be heightened during periods of high unemployment when job security becomes an even more serious concern.⁴⁵

In addition to the concerns of workers and their unions, first-line managers are also often wary of their superiors' motives for wanting change. One of the most common outcomes of innovation in the workplace is a reduction in the amount of immediate supervision and some fairly radical changes in the roles of first-line managers.⁴⁶ Foremen and supervisors, therefore, fear that their jobs either will be eliminated or will change so much that they will be unable to handle their new responsibilities.⁴⁷ Given this situation, it is understandable that resistance from first-line management has often been one of the more serious obstacles to organizational change.⁴⁸

3.1

Some ways to deal with obstacles related to motive

As long as innovation in the workplace is strongly identified with management attempts to avoid unionization or to undermine the union movement in any way, it will be very difficult to get union support for it. Therefore, given the important role of unions in our society,⁴⁹ anyone hoping to promote a more widespread acceptance of new work forms will have to ensure unionists of two things: that a significant proportion of those people who promote change recognize and support the need for strong unions, and that change can be achieved in such a way as to strengthen the union movement.

Recognition of the need for strong unions could be demonstrated via public statements supporting the on-going role of the union movement; and via refusals to endorse, in any way, unilateral management programs in non-union companies, especially where the programs may be part of a "union-free" strategy. In addition, several union leaders have argued that the most effective thing which proponents of an improved quality of working life could do to convince unionists of their sincerity would be to help change the laws in order to facilitate unionization.⁵⁰ This position has also been supported by the findings of one of Canada's leading industrial relations experts, who believes that "Unions in Canada would be more likely to respond positively to such initiatives if they were granted greater legitimacy and institutional security".⁵¹

Within our current industrial relations climate, some of the above actions may be difficult. Nonetheless, it should be possible to demonstrate that new work forms can be made to work for the union movement. Experience has shown that there is at least one approach that can be useful in gaining union support.

The first step in this approach is to initiate change programs in companies where there is a strong union with strong leadership and no serious intra-union tensions, and where the management of the company accepts the legitimacy of the union and is committed to the value of the collective bargaining process.⁵² The next step is then to ensure that the change program is under the joint ownership of the company and the union (not just the workers") from its start. The union should participate fully in all stages of the change process – in the diagnosis of problems, the choosing of third-party assistance, the development and consideration of possible solutions, the implementation and evaluation of the chosen solutions, and the receiving of credit or blame for the outcomes of the program.⁵³ It may also be necessary that each specific change at first be considered experimental and that both parties have veto power to stop any part, or even the whole of the program, if they feel it is harmful to them.⁵⁴ The attitude of Canadian unionists to new work forms would probably become much more positive if they could be shown, as have been their Swedish counterparts, that "... where the unions urged on the experiments and were 'in on them' from the beginning, there has been a new and stronger interest in trade unionism among the membership."⁵⁵

There are also several steps which have been found to be useful in securing support for change programs at lower levels of the organization. Experimentation has shown that provisions should be made at the start of any program to assure the workers, and the lower levels of management, that they will not suffer as a result of the innovation. In many change programs the workers and first-line managers have been given written guarantees that no-one will lose their job because of the program.⁵⁶ With respect to first-line managers, special training programs have been provided to help them develop the new skills they will need as the nature of their roles change.⁵⁷

It has been found to be extremely important that there be methods (in some cases this may simply be the regular collective bargaining process) by which to ensure that the workers share in any economic gains resulting from the innovation.⁵⁸ It is also essential that the program be conducted openly so that all members of the organization are kept informed on everything that occurs as the program progresses.⁵⁹

Some people argue that one way to help overcome worker and union suspicions about management's motives is for management to be open and honest about their motives from the start. It is unlikely, given their responsibility to the owners of an organization for its financial success, that management will initiate or continue to support a program (which will probably cost them time and money) if they do not feel they have reasonably good expectations of getting something of value from it—either in direct financial terms or in terms of long-run survival. Workers know this and expect it as part of management's job. Some proponents of change, therefore, believe that workers will be far less suspicious if management is open about such expectations and states them as explicit goals of the program.⁶⁰ If the change program is being controlled jointly by both parties, then the union can also state its goals explicitly and the program can proceed in a way

that is not only open, but also realistic and practicable.

As a final comment on the problem of motives, it is important to note that quite apart from what unions might be able to gain from change, there is good reason for the union movement itself to be concerned with developing a positive approach for dealing with new work forms.⁶¹ The fact that some innovative arrangements have been shown to be effective as part of an anti-union strategy is evidence that they do offer something which workers value. In fact, more and more non-union managers have begun to use such things as greater worker participation in the same way as they have always used good wages and benefits—to show the workers that they do not need a union or, as most unionists would put it, "to buy the workers off". It is, therefore, likely that unions will continue to suffer by management's use of workplace innovation if they continue only to oppose it. Just as they would not be able to deal with management offers of high wages by opposing high wages *per se*, unions need to develop an approach for dealing with new work forms which recognizes the appeal which such programs do have for workers and is able to capitalize on this appeal to the benefit of the union movement. Several American and Canadian unions, and union leaders, have already begun to lay the foundations for the development of such an approach.⁶²

Obstacles related to questions of power and control

It is useful to begin by defining what is meant by "power" and "control". The definitions which will be used here are those provided by Katzell, Yankelovich *et al.* (1975). Power is defined as, "Potential control ... A person or group may have power to affect other persons or groups, but unless the power is exercised no control or influence occurs".⁶³ Control is, "The degree to which the views or behavior of one person or group shape the views or behavior of another person or group".⁶⁴ Obstacles in this area relate to issues of both absolute and relative power and control.

4.1

Obstacles related to absolute power and control

With respect to absolute power and control, both unionists and managers fear that innovation may interfere with their ability to control the aspects of the organization and work situation for which they are responsible. Innovation means new, often unknown organizational structures and patterns of behaviour. These new forms inevitably require at least some knowledge, abilities, or skills which are different from those required within traditional organizations. Innovation, therefore, can be risky. People who have developed the knowledge and skills needed to control events in a traditional environment fear that they may not be able to maintain that control in a situation that is fundamentally different.⁶⁵

Even if people are eventually able to develop the expertise required within new work forms, there will always be an adjustment period where the situation is less under control and where it may be more difficult for people to produce the results expected of them. Therefore, many managers and unionists, at all levels of their respective organizations fear that involvement in programs aimed at changing the workplace may jeopardize their careers.

Managers, particularly first-line and middle managers, fear that their superiors may not support them if and when problems occur within the program.⁶⁶ Local union leaders have similar fears, but to a greater degree because there are two groups to whom they are accountable—the local membership and the senior union officials. The local leaders worry that if there appears to be even a temporary drop in their ability to protect the immediate interests of the membership, then the membership may remove them from power and/or their relationship with senior union officials may suffer in some way. Unionists at all levels also have the problem that if they seem to suffer any loss of control at all, the membership and/or the union movement overall may feel that they are being co-opted by management.⁶⁷

Opportunities could be provided for union and management people to acquire the knowledge and skills they will need to deal effectively with new work forms. Although certain kinds of expertise could be developed through joint programs, it would also probably be necessary to have separate programs where unionists and managers could deal with problems and concerns that are particular to them.⁶⁸

In addition, most managers and unionists may be unwilling to risk the problems of innovation unless they are certain they will be supported at all levels (in particular, at top levels) of their organizations. In many cases this support may have to include rewards, such as pay increases or promotions, for risk-taking.⁶⁹ Organization-wide support for the change program is necessary for an additional reason. Since an organization is a system of interdependent parts, the kinds of innovation being discussed here eventually depend on the cooperation of people at all levels of both the union and management hierarchies.⁷⁰ It should be noted, however, that support from the top levels of the hierarchies should be given in such a way as not to cause intra-organizational rivalries between the parts of the organizations which are directly involved in the change program and the parts which are not.⁷¹

4.1.1

Some ways to deal with obstacles related to absolute power and control

Many people, in both management and labour, fear that innovation of the kind being discussed here may involve a redistribution of power in the workplace in favour of the other party. Management is afraid that labour will become more powerful and labour is afraid that management will become more powerful. Management fears are primarily a reaction to some of the theoretical arguments that are given for new work forms. Union fears, on the other hand, are based more on what they believe to be the realities of the work situation—realities based on the actual legal and economic conditions of our current industrial relations system.

One of the major theoretical arguments for many forms of organizational change, is the argument that workers and their unions should participate in making many of the decisions which commonly have been under unilateral management control (e.g. methods of production, hiring policies). Therefore, although it may be true that certain innovations can eventually increase the total amount of control of both unions and management,⁷² many new work forms would theoretically involve a redistribution of power to increase the power of the workers and their union relative to that of management.⁷³ In addition, if such a redistribution of decision-making responsibilities were to occur, it is possible that the workers might demand an equivalent redistribution of the status and pay advantages which such responsibilities have traditionally carried with them.

Many managers, at all levels of the management hierarchy, resist change because they do not want a redistribution of power within the organization.⁷⁴ There are several different reasons for such resistance. First, some managers believe that they can (and ought to be able to)

Obstacles related to relative power and control

manage the organization more effectively by themselves. They feel that making decisions is their responsibility, and that the cumbersomeness of a participative decision-making process would more than offset anything of benefit which the workers might have to offer.⁷⁵ Second, many managers would not willingly give up the advantages in pay and status which their superior power position has given them.⁷⁶ Similarly, some of the workers who have held the better jobs within a traditional organization might also resist change because they do not want to give up their relatively privileged position.⁷⁷ And lastly, some people simply enjoy the unilateral exercise of power; they are autocrats and do not like democratic processes.

The above problems also apply to the internal distribution of power within each of the management and union organizations. Many new work forms theoretically would require not only an equalization of power between management and labour, but also a greater sharing of power within each organization itself. Just as some managers do not want to share power with unions and workers, there are people in positions of power in both the management and union hierarchies who do not want to share their power with other people within their own organizations.

In contrast to management's concerns, many unionists believe that it is unrealistic to expect that the kinds of participation which characterize many new work forms will result in any significant redistribution of power. In fact, they argue that many of the current proposals for "democratizing" the workplace will actually increase the power and control of management. This argument rests on the belief that the legal and economic realities of our industrial relations system result in a fundamentally uneven distribution of power with respect to the work relationship. Many people maintain that both the law and the unequal distribution of the ownership of resources within the "free market" give a heavy balance of power to the employer.⁷⁸

Since the employer is generally free (except for a few minimum standards of employment) to organize the workplace as he chooses, unionization is one of the few ways the workers have to achieve power. And because our legal system usually grants any residual powers to the employer, unions have learnt that the only way to be sure of having some control over a situation is to specify precisely, in a written contract, all the conditions governing that situation. As White (1975) explains,

In pursuit of job control for their members, unions have over the years sought and succeeded in the effort to enmesh the typical job covered by a collective bargaining agreement in a protective web of rules, procedures, and definitions, covering every facet from the content of the job and access to it, through its evaluation and compensation value, to the conditions under which it will be performed.⁷⁹

Seniority and rigidly defined job classification and payment systems are fundamental to this system of job control, which was hard and long fought for and is cherished by the union movement.

In some ways, several of the more innovative work forms (e.g., participative job enrichment and semi-autonomous work groups) are in conflict with this traditional union system of job control. Most people agree that these new forms require mutual trust and respect between management and labour.⁸⁰ They require flexibility, they usually

involve the blurring of job boundaries, and they often make it more difficult to maintain a system based strictly on seniority.⁸¹

Many unionists and workers, however, are skeptical about such things as flexibility, trust and cooperation in a situation which they feel is stacked against them. They fear that if they relax the control system which unions have won through precisely defined, legally-binding collective agreements, management will gain even more power via the principle of residual rights. Experience has taught many unionists never to trust management not to abuse its power. They believe that unless employers are carefully restrained, many managers will organize the workplace in a way that is usually inequitable and often unsafe.⁸²

4.2.1

Some ways to deal with obstacles related to relative power and control

Studies have shown that "... for co-operation to occur, parties to this co-operation must be fairly equal in power in terms of legal rights, access to information and skill".⁸³ The most effective thing which can be done within our current industrial relations system to ensure the legal rights of unions and, thereby, to allay their fears that new work forms may erode the job control they have won through collective bargaining, is to guarantee the sanctity of the collective agreement at the start of any change program (as was done at Shell Canada, Steinbergs and Harman Industries, for example).⁸⁴ Any innovation toward greater participation and co-operation must be seen as an adjunct to collective bargaining and not as a substitute for it.⁸⁵

It is necessary to distinguish carefully and clearly between issues subject to the adversarial processes of collective bargaining and issues subject to new, more collaborative processes.⁸⁶ In order for the union to maintain its power and its credibility, it is essential that it continue to bargain aggressively for the workers' interests within the collective bargaining arena.⁸⁷ Any changes to the collective agreement should be made with caution and safeguards should be carefully negotiated, for both labour and management, to cover the changes.⁸⁸ Changes should also be reversible; that is, there should be an initial period of time wherein either party can reinstitute the original conditions should they find the change unsuitable.⁸⁹

Since part of any power advantage which management might have comes from its control of information, the union should be given additional access to "management-level" information.⁹⁰ In order for the parties to be equal in terms of skill, many workers and some unionists and lower level managers may need special education programs to learn to deal with this information and with group problem solving processes in general.⁹¹

It is equally important, and equally difficult, to deal with the fears which cause managers to resist a redistribution of power. The most important strategy in this respect, is to re-educate managers at all levels to take on new functions to replace those which they may lose, or have to share, within new work forms. Within many of the change programs being discussed here, management roles at

each level of the organization will change significantly and people should be helped to develop the skills and attitudes appropriate to their new roles.⁹² Since it is still true, however, that not all people will be suited to participative management styles, within new work forms it will be necessary to select people carefully for responsible positions.⁹³

A final approach, which has been stressed earlier, but which is also relevant to the concerns which both management and labour have about the effects of innovation on the distribution of power in the workplace, is the condition that the change program be jointly controlled by the union and management at all times. Joint control should help to reassure both parties that change will occur only in a form, and at a pace with which they feel able to cope. Given the seriousness of the concerns in this area; it may be hypothesized, however, that joint programs will be most likely to occur, and have the greatest chance of success where both the union and management are relatively powerful and feel secure of their ability to maintain control over the situation as it evolves.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed a wide range of obstacles to the general acceptance and further diffusion of new work forms in Canada. Although the list of obstacles has not been completely exhaustive, it is long enough to demonstrate that it is not easy to achieve major changes in the workplace. The conditions necessary for success are sufficiently numerous that experimentation should not be undertaken casually. Sites for change programs should be carefully chosen. All parties involved can expect to meet with at least some resistance and they should be willing to deal with it patiently. Above all, people must recognize and respect the fact that change takes time; the more significant the change, the longer it may take.⁹⁴

In its exploration of ways to overcome resistance to new work forms, this paper has reflected what emerges overwhelmingly in the literature on organizational change—that the process whereby change is achieved is at least as important as any specific outcomes attained. The “participative approach”, in which the workers and their representatives (where such exist) participate fully with management in all stages of a change program, has been shown to be essential for overcoming many of the obstacles related to questions of need, motive, and power and control. If unilateral initiatives continue to be the major form of workplace innovation, it is unlikely that the kinds of change discussed in this paper will gain widespread acceptance within the Canadian industrial relations scene.

Footnotes

It is hoped that the following footnotes will provide a kind of "bibliography by topic", which can be used by the reader to identify further readings on particular issues of interest.

1. Alber, 1978; Archer, 1975; Davis and Trist, 1974; Emery and Thorsrud, 1976; Hew, 1973; Jenkins, 1974; Katzell *et al.*, 1975; Swedish LO, 1977; Mansell *et al.*, 1978; Walton, 1977; Weil, 1976
2. Emery and Thorsrud, 1976; Mansell *et al.*, 1978; Trist, 1978; Walton, 1975; Zimbalist, 1975
3. Lawler and Drexler, 1978; Lewin, 1974
4. Walton, 1975
5. For example, the term Quality of Working Life (QWL) is commonly used and understood to refer to a very wide range of workplace innovations.
6. Barbash, 1977; Fein, 1974; Sanderson, 1974; Seeman, 1971
7. Barbash, 1977
8. C.N. Weaver, *What Workers Want from Their Jobs*, 1976, p. 50
9. Barbash, 1977; Docquier, 1977; Poulin, 1978; Strauss, 1977; Tchobanian, 1975; Reader, 1974; Delamotte, 1975
10. William Winpisinger, *Job Enrichment: A Union View*, 1973, p. 54
11. White, 1977
12. George Strauss, *Managerial Practices*, 1977, p. 353
13. Boisvert, 1977; Burstein, 1975; Hackman and Lawler, 1971; Seashore, 1972
14. Leonard Woodcock. In Jack Barbash, *Humanizing Work - A New Ideology*, 1977, p. 12
15. Form, 1973/74; Nash, 1977; Seeman, 1971; Strauss, 1974; Tudor, 1972
16. Barbash, 1977; Fein, 1974
17. William Winpisinger. In Al Nash, *Quality of Work Life*, 1977, p. 5
18. Kinder, 1977; Schlesinger and Walton, 1977
19. Batt and Weinberg, 1978
20. Schlesinger and Walton, 1977; Walton, 1975
21. Katzell *et al.*, 1975
22. Lawler and Drexler, 1978
23. Burstein *et al.*, 1975; Strauss, 1974
24. Hackman and Suttle, 1977; Katzell *et al.*, 1975; Rosow, 1978; White, 1977
25. Burstein *et al.*, 1975; White, 1977
26. Argyris, 1973; Kasl, 1974; Emery and Thorsrud, 1976; Katzell *et al.*, 1975; Porter, Lawler and Hackman, 1975; Schlesinger and Walton, 1977; Strauss, 1974
27. Bluestone, 1977; Katzell *et al.*, 1975; Rosow, 1978
28. Weil, 1976
29. Bluestone, 1977; Ephlin, 1973; Emery and Thorsrud, 1976; WWR, 1976a; Strauss, 1977; Katzell *et al.*, 1975; Tchobanian, 1975
30. Emery and Thorsrud, 1976; Katzell *et al.*, 1975; Schlesinger and Walton, 1977; Trist, 1974
31. Emery and Thorsrud, 1976; Strauss, 1977; WWR, 1976a
32. Batt and Weinberg, 1978; Bernstein, 1976
33. Bisanz, 1978; Katzell *et al.*, 1975; Walton 1975
34. Batt and Weinberg, 1978; Bluestone, 1977; Katzell *et al.*, 1975; Lawler and Drexler, 1978; Strauss, 1977; Walton, 1977
35. Apply and Winder, 1977; Strauss and Rosenstein, 1970
36. Archer, 1975; Barbash, 1977; Bisanz, 1977; Docquier, 1977a; Poulin, 1978; Strauss, 1977; Tchobanian, 1975
37. Mansell *et al.*, 1978; Nash, 1977
38. G. Strauss and E. Rosenstein, *Workers Participation: A Critical View*, 1970, p. 212
39. Policy Statement on QWL by District 6, U.S.W.A., 1978, pp. 1-2
40. Speech by Gerald Docquier, September 13, 1977, p. 8
41. Docquier, 1977a; WWR, 1976a
42. Strauss, 1977
43. William Winpisinger, *In the Real World We Have to Eat*, 1978, p. 7
44. Batt and Weinberg, 1978; Barbash, 1977; Docquier, 1977a; Schlesinger and Walton, 1977; Strauss, 1977; Tchobanian, 1975
45. Emery and Thorsrud, 1976; Poulin, 1978
46. Emery and Thorsrud, 1976; Mansell *et al.*, 1978; Strauss, 1977
47. *Business Week*, 1977; Kinder, 1977; Schlesinger and Walton, 1977; Walton, 1975
48. Benedict, 1977; Trist, 1978
49. Not only do unions currently represent approximately 50% of the non-farm workforce in Canada (according to 1978 figures of Labour Canada, plus estimates by industrial relations experts of the number of "Rand formula" workers who are covered by collective agreements yet are not union members), but they also provide the only means by which labour (as a distinct interest group) can express its views. For further development of this view see Bain, 1978.
50. Docquier, 1977a; Ephlin, 1973
51. George Sayers Bain, *Union Growth and Public Policy in Canada*, 1978, p. 47
52. Bisanz, 1978; Emery and Thorsrud, 1976; Strauss, 1977
53. Appley and Winder, 1977; Emery and Thorsrud, 1976; Ephlin, 1973; Bluestone, 1977; Katzell *et al.*, 1975; Lawler and Drexler, 1978; WWR, 1976a; WWR, 1976b; Strauss, 1977; Tchobanian, 1975; Walton, 1977
54. Lawler and Drexler, 1978; Schlesinger and Walton, 1977; Strauss, 1977
55. LO, *Work Organization*, 1976, p. 30
56. Brooker and Allison, 1974; Ephlin, 1973; Batt and Weinberg, 1978; Schlesinger and Walton, 1977; Walton, 1977; Strauss, 1977
57. Emery and Thorsrud, 1976; Schlesinger and Walton, 1977; Wilson, 1977
58. Batt and Weinberg, 1978; Bernstein, 1976; Ephlin, 1973; Katzell *et al.*, 1975; Schlesinger and Walton, 1977; Tchobanian, 1975; Strauss, 1977; Walton, 1977
59. Batt and Weinberg, 1978; Strauss, 1977, WWR, 1976b
60. Walton, 1977; Norm Halpern, Shell Canada, in personal communication, 1978

61. van Beinum, 1966
62. See Bluestone, 1977a, 1977b; U.S.W.A. District 6, 1978; Reimer, 1979; Docquier, 1977a, 1977b; Ephlin, 1973, 1977; UAW Statement, 1979; PSAC, Policy Paper No. 18, 1979.
63. Katzell *et al.*, *Work, Productivity, and Job Satisfaction*, 1975, p. 416
64. Katzell *et al.*, *Ibid*, 1975, p. 414
65. Kinder, 1977; Emery and Thorsrud, 1976; Lawler and Drexler, 1978; Schlesinger and Walton, 1977; Walton, 1975
66. *Business Week*, 1977; Lawler and Drexler, 1978; Walton, 1975, 1977
67. Lawler and Drexler, 1978
68. Bernstein, 1976; Cherns, 1978; Emery and Thorsrud, 1976; Wilson, 1977
69. Strauss, 1977; Walton, 1975
70. Appley and Winder, 1977; Bisanz, 1978; Lawler and Drexler, 1978; Strauss, 1977; Walton, 1975, 1977
71. Walton, 1975
72. Tannenbaum, 1974; Wilson, 1977
73. Strauss, 1977; Vaughan, 1976; Walton, 1975
74. Batt and Weinberg, 1978; Benedict, 1977; Brooker and Allison, 1974; Emery and Thorsrud, 1976; Strauss, 1977; *Business Week*, 1977; Schlesinger and Walton, 1977; Vaughan, 1976; *WWR*, 1976a; Walton, 1975
75. Kinder, 1977; Schlesinger and Walton, 1977
76. Vaughan, 1976
77. Archer, 1975; Barbash, 1977; Emery and Thorsrud, 1976; White, 1975; Mansell *et al.*, 1978
78. Broadbent, 1978; Ewing, 1977
79. Bernard J. White, *Union Response to the Humanization of Work: An Explanatory Proposition*, 1975, p. 6
80. Batt and Weinberg, 1978; Katzell *et al.*, 1975, Trist, 1978
81. Barbash, 1977, Mansell *et al.*, 1978; Schlesinger and Walton, 1977; Strauss, 1977; Tchobanian, 1975
82. Broadbent, 1978; Poulin, 1978; Docquier, 1977a
83. A. D. Boyd *et al.*, *Workers Participation and the Quality of Life: A Behavioural Analysis*, 1977, p. 74
84. In Sweden, under a slightly different industrial relations system, the national program to promote more democratic work forms included legislative changes to increase the legal rights of unions with respect to control over the immediate work situation. For details see, *Labour Gazette*, October 1976, pp. 535-540
85. Bisanz, 1977; Bluestone, 1977a; Cherns, 1978; Kochan *et al.*, 1974; Lawler and Drexler, 1978
86. Bluestone, 1977a
87. Bisanz, 1977
88. Rosow, 1978; Strauss, 1977; Tchobanian, 1975
89. Lawler and Drexler, 1978; Schlesinger and Walton, 1977; Walton, 1975
90. Appley and Winder, 1977; Bernstein, 1976; Katzell *et al.*, 1975
91. Bernstein, 1976; Lawler and Drexler, 1978
92. Archer, 1975; Donnelly, 1977; Emery and Thorsrud, 1976; Strauss, 1977; Walton, 1977
93. Archer, 1975; Donnelly, 1977; Mansell *et al.*, 1978
94. Appley and Winder, 1977; Donnelly, 1977; Lawler and Drexler, 1978; Swedish LO, 1976

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